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## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### A TYPICAL "AMERICA LETTER"

In Norway letters from emigrants to the United States — popularly known as "America letters" — constituted, before 1838, the only written accounts of American conditions which were available for those peasants and artisans whose economically restricted situation rendered particularly interesting to them any authentic information as to resources and opportunities in the new world. These letters, describing personal experiences and offering observations on actual conditions in the new environment, were sent to friends and relatives, then copied, and recopied, and passed from one family to another, thus gaining a very considerable circulation. After 1838 a small number of guidebooks and books of travel appeared and were widely distributed. Later the northwestern states, little influenced by the wave of nativism that swept the east in the fifties, flooded the northern European countries with pamphlets picturing America as a veritable El Dorado and offering unusual inducements to venturesome men and women.<sup>1</sup> Returned immigrants, emigration agents, representatives of states, railways, land companies, and steamship lines arrived in the Scandinavian kingdoms to enforce by personal influence the effect of the written and printed word. But long after 1838 the private letters went to large numbers of places where the "America book,"<sup>2</sup> and other pamphlets of a similar nature were unknown, and to which few travelers ever came. The "America letters" were circulated not only through oft-repeated copying, but also by being printed in newspapers. In fact, a common substitute for the mails was the use of newspapers as a channel

<sup>1</sup> A study of this official state activity, with special reference to Wisconsin, may be found in Theodore C. Blegen, "The competition of the northwestern states for immigrants," in the *Wisconsin magazine of history*, 3: 3-29.

<sup>2</sup> Rynning's *True account of America* was everywhere known, among the Norwegian peasants, as the "America book."

of personal communication. In Norwegian newspapers published in America, letters were not infrequently printed in full, and reached their private destination through the circulation of the newspapers.<sup>3</sup> In Norway also, the newspapers aided materially in the dissemination of information about life in the American settlements.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of the earlier letters lies in their informative character. But as time went on and the immigrants in America, who were rapidly pushing their way into the northwest, began to grow prosperous, their letters would often contain money or prepaid tickets. It is estimated that approximately one-half of the immigrants to America from Norway in the later period made the journey on prepaid tickets purchased in America.<sup>5</sup>

Of all the Norwegian writers of "America letters," the most influential and widely famed was an emigrant of the year 1831 who settled in the small colony in western New York which had been founded in 1825 by the first group of Norwegian immigrants to America in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> This man, Gjert Gregoriussen Hovland, was no scholarly critic; he wrote for the benefit of peasants, and he was himself a farmer of moderate attainments. Perhaps he painted his picture in colors somewhat too bright; possibly he did not sufficiently stress the difficulties to be encountered. But on the whole his picture of America was not untrue. He possessed sufficient discernment to see that the United States offered many opportunities that were denied the farmer in Norway. Inexpensive land in a country

<sup>3</sup> For a good illustration, see Albert O. Barton, "The beginnings of the Norwegian press in America," in Wisconsin historical society, *Proceedings*, 1916 (Madison, 1917), 203-204.

<sup>4</sup> Some early instances are *Bergens Stiftstidende*, June 11, 1841 (printing a group of "America letters" written by emigrants of 1839); *Fyens Stiftstavis*, 1847, nos. 266, 267 (containing an "account of the conditions among the Norwegian settlers in Wisconsin," written by the pioneer minister, C. L. Clausen); *Christeligt Folkeblad*, vol. 1 (1846), no. 36 (containing another letter written by C. L. Clausen). A monthly newspaper called *Norway and America* was published in Norway in the years 1845-1847.

<sup>5</sup> See Theodore C. Blegen, "The America letters," in the *North star*, 2:43.

<sup>6</sup> The most detailed account of this New York settlement of Norwegians is in Rasmus B. Anderson, *The first chapter of Norwegian immigration (1821-1840) its causes and results. With an introduction on the services rendered by the Scandinavians to the world and to America* (second edition — Madison, Wisconsin, 1904), 54-131.

of freedom and democratic institutions gave promise of happiness and prosperity. Those who came in response to his invitation found after a few years of effort the contentment of which there is promise in Hovland's lines.

The letters of Hovland were spread about in southern Norway by the hundreds of copies, everywhere arousing interest in America and replacing with definite and concise information the vague rumors and guesses that filled so many minds with uncertainty about the land to the west. The emigration from Norway in 1836 and 1837 was directly and very considerably influenced by Hovland's letters; and, directly or indirectly, the movement after 1837 bore witness to their effectiveness.<sup>7</sup> Evidence indicates that, though the letters had greatest influence in southwestern Norway, they found their way into many other parts of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

The comparatively large emigration from Norway in 1836 and 1837 awakened the apprehension of state officials, and a thorough investigation was ordered in the Hardanger district. The dean of this district, the Reverend Nils Herzberg, assembled all information available, and submitted a report to the *amt-mand*. Accompanying this report were copies of several typical "America letters," including one written by Hovland from *Raakeister* (Rochester, New York) on April 22, 1835.<sup>9</sup> Recently a copy of Dean Herzberg's report was made from the original in the local archives at Ullensvang, Norway. The following translation of Hovland's letter was made from this transcription, which is now in the manuscript collection of the Minnesota historical society.<sup>10</sup>

#### THEODORE C. BLEGEN

<sup>7</sup> For estimates on the influence of Hovland's letters see Theodore C. Blegen, "Ole Rynning's true account of America," in *Minnesota history bulletin*, 2:242; Knud Langeland, *Normændene i Amerika, Nogle optegnelser om de Norskes udvandring til Amerika* (Chicago, 1889), 16 and n.; Svein Nilsson, "De skandinaviske sætlementer i Amerika," in *Billed-magazin*, 1:74; Kendrick C. Babcock, *The Scandinavian element in the United States (University of Illinois studies in the social sciences*, vol. 3, no. 3 — Urbana, 1914), 30, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *First chapter of Norwegian immigration*, 331.

<sup>9</sup> Herzberg testifies to the importance of Hovland's letters.

<sup>10</sup> O. Olafson, "To Amerikabreve fra 1835," in *Normands-forbundet*, 4: 265-271; Blegen, "The America letters," in the *North star*, 2:44, and "Cleng Peerson and Norwegian immigration," in the *MISSISSIPPI VALLEY HISTORICAL REVIEW*, 7: 316 and n. 54.

*To Torjuls Asbjeldsen Mæland, Ullensvang Sogn, Kingservigs, Præstegjæld, Norway:*

I must take this opportunity to let you know that we are in the best of health, and that we — both my wife and I — find ourselves exceedingly well satisfied. Our son attends the English school, and talks English as well as the native-born. Nothing has made me more happy and contented than the fact that we left Norway and journeyed to this country. We have gained more since our arrival here than I did during all the time that I lived in Norway, and I have every prospect of earning a livelihood here for myself and my family—even if my family were larger — so long as God gives me good health.

Such excellent plans have been developed here that, even though one be infirm, no one need suffer want. Competent men are elected whose duty it is to see that no needy persons, either in the cities or in the country, shall have to beg for their living. If a man dies and is survived by a widow and children who are unable to support themselves—as is often the case—they have the privilege of petitioning these officials. To each one will then be given every year as much as is needed of clothes and food, and no discrimination will be shown between the native-born and those from foreign countries. These things I have learned through daily observation, and I do not believe there can be better laws and arrangements for the benefit and happiness of the common man in the whole world. I have talked with a sensible person who has traveled in many countries, who has lived here twenty-six years, and has full knowledge of the matter; both of him and of other reliable persons I have made inquiries, for I wish to let everyone learn the truth.

When assemblies are held to elect officials who are to serve the country, the vote of the common man carries just as much authority and influence as does that of the rich and powerful man. Neither in the matter of clothes nor in seats are distinctions to be observed, whether one be a farmer or a clerk. The freedom which the one enjoys is just as good as that of the other. So long as he comports himself honestly he will be subjected to no interference. Everybody has the liberty to travel about in the country, wherever he wishes, without any passports or papers. Everyone is permitted to engage in whatever business he finds most desirable, in trade or commerce, by land or by water. But if anyone is found guilty of crime, he will be prosecuted and severely punished for it.

No duties are levied upon goods which are produced in the country and brought to the city by water or by land. In case of death, no registration is required; the survivor, after paying the debts, is free to dispose of the property for himself and his family just as he desires. There

is no one here who snatches it away, like a beast of prey, wanting only to live by the sweat of others and to make himself the heir to the money of others. No, everyone must work for his living here, and it makes no difference whether he is of low or of high estate. It would heartily please me if I could learn that everyone of you who are in need and have little chance of gaining support for yourselves and your families would make up your mind to leave Norway and to come to America, for, even if many more were to come, there would still be room here for all. For all those who are willing to work there is no lack of employment and business here. It is possible for all to live in comfort and without suffering want. I do not believe that any of those who suffer under the oppression of others and who must rear their children under straightened circumstances could do better than to help the latter to come to America. But alas, many persons, even though they want to come, lack the necessary means, and many others are so stupid as to believe that it is best to live in the country where they have been brought up even if they have nothing but hard bread to satisfy their hunger. It is as if they should say that those who move to a better land, where there is plenty, commit a wrong. But I can find no place where our Creator has forbidden one to seek one's food in an honorable manner. I should like to talk to many persons in Norway for a little while, but we do not wish to live in Norway. We lived there altogether too long. Nor have I talked with any immigrant in this country who wished to return.

We left our home in Norway on June 24, 1831. Sailing from Gottenborg on July 30, we landed in America September 18, and by October 4 we had reached this place in the interior where we now live. The day after my arrival I began to work for an American. In December I went and bought myself fifty acres of land. I put up a house which we moved into in the month of March, 1832. I then set to work with the greatest will and pleasure, for the land was covered with trees. In the fall I planted about one barrel of wheat and in the spring of 1833 we planted about half a bushel of Indian corn and three bushels of potatoes (the latter in May). The next fall we harvested fifteen barrels of wheat, six barrels of Indian corn, and fourteen barrels of potatoes. Wheat, which is grown almost everywhere, is used for one's daily food. It costs from three to four dollars a barrel, corn costs from one and one-half to two dollars a barrel, and potatoes fifty cents a barrel. Oats are a dollar a barrel, being used not for human food, but for the cattle and horses. We purchased a cow in April of the first year that we were here for eighteen dollars, from which we milked six *kander* (Norwegian measure) a day and sometimes more. A pound of butter costs, in the

towns, from eight to twelve *skillings*, salt pork from four to eight *skillings* a pound, and meat four *skillings* a pound.

A hired man engaged for a whole year receives from eight to twelve dollars per month in addition to board, washing, and lodging. A servant girl receives one dollar a week, or fifty dollars a year, besides board, washing, and lodging, and is not required to do heavy or outside work, but only work within the house. A laborer engaged to work the soil receives from one-half to one dollar a day and free board.

I can also inform you that the land is measured off with a pole eight ells and six inches long, this being called a *rod*. An acre measures sixteen rods in length by ten in breadth. One hundred acres, here called a *lot*, makes a piece of land of considerable size. I am certain that from fifty acres here, we harvest many times more than from a *gaard* in Norway. I believe that an acre is something more than a *tönde sæd* in Norway; an acre is sown with two bushels of wheat.<sup>11</sup>

Six families of the Norwegians who had settled in this place sold their farms last summer and moved farther west in the country to a place which is called *Ellenaais*.<sup>12</sup> We and another Norwegian family have also sold our farms and intend to journey, this May, to that state, where land can be bought at a better price, and where it is easier for one to get started. The supply of trees there is only sufficient to meet one's actual needs. Cattle can be fed there at little cost, for one can cut as much hay there as one needs. There is an untold amount of land which the United States own and which is reserved by an established law at a set price for the one who first buys it from the government. It is called public land, and is sold for \$1.25 per acre. Land thus bought and paid for is held in allodial possession for the purchaser and his heirs. Whether native-born or foreign, one is free to do with it whatever one pleases.

This is a very beautiful and fertile country. Prosperity and contentment are to be seen almost everywhere one goes. Practically everything that one needs can be sown or planted here; it grows splendidly and yields in many-fold measure, without the use of manure.

<sup>11</sup> A *gaard* is a Norwegian farm. A *tönde sæd*, or *tönde land*, is a Norwegian measure of land, 56,000 square feet. Perhaps Hovland means merely that an acre and a *tönde land* are not identical. Actually the latter is larger than the former.

<sup>12</sup> Hovland here refers to the migration, in 1834, of Norwegians from the New York settlement to the Fox river valley in Illinois. The leader of this movement was Cleng Peerson, who in 1833 had visited Illinois and selected the site for the settlement. The Fox river settlement was the first Norwegian settlement in the west, and it became a nucleus from which settlement radiated, in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. See Blegen, "Cleng Peerson and Norwegian immigration," in the MISSISSIPPI VALLEY HISTORICAL REVIEW, 7: 318-321.

Excellent order and good laws exist here, and the country is governed by wise authorities.

I sold my land last summer, in July, 1834, and by the transaction earned in cash the sum of five hundred dollars. I have now decided to buy one hundred and sixty acres, an amount which can be paid for with two hundred dollars. The eight Norwegian families still in this neighborhood desire to sell their land as soon as they can, and to move west, for they prefer to live near each other, although many of the natives are just as good people.<sup>13</sup>

In America one associates with good and kindly people. Everyone has the freedom to practice that teaching and religion which he himself favors. Nor are there any taxes to be paid here, except for the land one owns, and not even that tax is large. Nor are there other useless expenditures for the support of persons — as in many places in Europe — who are of no benefit, but much rather to the harm of the country. For the fifty acres which I have sold I paid annually one dollar in taxes. I must let you know that on the piece of land which we sold there were more trees than I could count of the kind that produces sugar, and these trees were common everywhere. We did not take more than we needed for our own use each year. Usually it is in March that one does this work, when the sap begins to spring up in the trees; with a small iron one chops a dent in the tree, placing under it a piece of hollowed-out wood as a trough. From out of the tree there come forth from two to three pails of sweet sap a day, and this sap produces sugar, syrup, ale and vinegar.

There is much more of which I could write to you, but I will close for this time, with hearty greetings from my wife and son and myself to you, my relatives and acquaintances. Let us be happy in heart and consecrated in spirit so that when the race has been run, when the pilgrim's staff has been laid down, we may be worthy of hearing the glorious words: "Blessed of my Father, come ye and inherit the kingdom and the righteousness prepared for you." Wherever we may wander in this earthly sphere, let us seek Him who is the true light and life, and follow His voice which calls to our hearts, no matter where we go or stand. Live well in the sight of God: that is my wish as your friend. Greetings to Knud Oppedal and Johannes Hovland and to all who inquire about me.<sup>14</sup>

April 22, 1835

GJERT GREGORIUSSEN HOVLAND

<sup>13</sup> Hovland himself went to Illinois in 1835 and lived in the Fox river valley settlement until his death in 1870.

<sup>14</sup> After noting the matters stressed in this typical "America letter" it is interesting to examine a report made in 1843-1844 by a Norwegian royal commission